

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE SUBJECT: WASIT  
PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAMS PRESENTER: COLONEL PETER  
BAKER, 214TH FIRES BRIGADE COMMANDER MODERATOR: CHARLES  
"JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT  
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COL. BAKER: Hello. This is Colonel Baker.

MR. HOLT: Colonel Baker, Jack Holt here with DOD's Bloggers Roundtable.  
And I'd like to thank you for joining us this afternoon. And sir, we've got -- the floor is  
yours. If you've got an opening statement, we're ready when you are.

COL. BAKER: Okay. First, I just want to verify if we've got everybody on line, I  
guess, that's already been through -- I'm jumping in between other things here. So I'll go  
ahead.

For those online, thanks for this. This is an important opportunity for us to  
exchange information and it'll give me an opportunity to make sure what is happening  
within my area that I can report on. And so if you'll bear with me for a moment, I want  
to take time just to read a prepared statement and make sure the message that everything  
that's happening is -- a lot's happening and I want to make sure I cover it all.

So again, from the beginning, my name is Colonel Peter Baker. I'm the 214th Fires  
Brigade commander. I'm stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. And as I said, this is a good  
opportunity for us to exchange information.

But tonight I want to talk about the capacity we're helping them build, to create here  
in Wasit Province, which is a southern province in Iraq, and how we're helping to achieve  
security, working with the police and the army throughout the province.

Our current initiatives on building the capacity are at all levels of the government.  
There's been significant signs of progress in the security. Just recently, March 4th, the  
Iraqi police and Iraqi army joined forces for the first time to conduct security operations  
here in Al Kut -- in a district of Al Kut.

This district, Azirawijat (ph), is known as -- has been known for its extremist stronghold for quite a while. And during this operation, the combined operations between the police and the army detained 25 people confiscated 65 rifles, a machine gun, pistols and explosive material and also a fair amount of ammunition.

Recently, they also confiscated -- in another operation, confiscated 450 mortar rounds and a mortar tube and various munitions, just this week.

In fact, since November 2000, the ISF, along with the civilians here in Al Kut and the surrounding areas have turned over 2,000 artillery rounds, over 1,000 mines, over 1,000 fuses, and 1,400 munitions and 80 aircraft bombs they've turned in -- all that could be used as an IED.

The message there is the Iraqi citizens are stepping forward. The Iraqi government, the Iraqi security forces are very active in securing -- their security. And this is becoming more and more common here.

One of the other things I want to talk about is the -- what my division has created, it's the NCO academy, and allowing to teach -- a more professional leadership course for the Iraqi security, whether that be the police or the army.

This blends into a program I started here with the police that deals with individual training, whether it be first aid -- I have an MP company here who is responsible to be here. Their mission is to train with the Iraqi police one-on-one, and we have taken this into a hands-on performance training. So between the two courses, the NCO academy and the MP training course, we're building capacity within the Iraqi security force, specifically the police. And as the security is getting better, we're doing more and more operations to build the capacity in different areas, and all of this is the support for allowing us to build upon. And specifically, I want to talk about the economic base and other aspects of what we're doing through the provincial reconstruction team, which is a team made up of the United States State Department that I'm partnering with.

And one of the things I want to really stress is we're very serious about building the capacity here. The State Department, along with the Department of the Army, has provided the most important capital, and that's people. And we're developing both near-term and long-term economic development programs for the citizens in Wasit.

Since we've arrived, the PRT has grown, as I said, has grown three -- now we're at the 30 and we're projected to go to 35. These are U.S. State Department-hired experts in agriculture, diplomacy, economic, business development and rule of law. And we are leveraging this great aspect of human capacity to increase the Iraqi government to provide services to its citizens -- local, professional and national.

And we truly are committed to assuring that the levels of government are interacting with each other. I applaud the State Department and the team here that I'm

partnering with, that they're very involved linking the city level of government to the provincial level government, making sure that they have supporting programs.

And one of the other aspects from the economic situation we're trying to increase is, there's a town not far from here, Noumea (sp), and they have a pickles and canning company. It has a capacity of over 400 employees, but only employs 20. And so we're working very hard to increase the capacity, which will provide more labor, more income.

Our biggest challenge here, as in many places, is unemployment, besides security. So we're trying to increase the -- both the security and, at the same time, employment opportunities.

There's another aspect that I'm very, very happy and pleased with is that we have a Charlie Medical Company assigned to me. They're from Fort Stewart, Georgia, and a surgical team from Shelby, Indiana. They've combined their efforts here. Their mission here is to provide medical support to all the coalition soldiers that I have here. And I have Georgian soldiers, Polish soldiers, Romanians, Kazakhs and Salvadorians, and recently added Lithuanians.

Also, though, we've started a program that -- they have teamed with their doctors in Washington, and they're providing a series of seminars that will build on their capacity and knowledge with these Iraqi doctors. The Iraqi doctors are school trained, they're competent, but they don't have the most current information nor the most current and modern equipment. So as we're building their human capital within the medical field, we're also going to hospitals to assess their capabilities and, where we can, we're helping to increase the capacities within these facilities. So it's improving the health care provider. It's going after the facility, whether we can buy some equipment, and making sure they're properly trained for that equipment.

We're also focusing on education in the province here. We've built several schools and refurbished others. We provide a higher education with furniture and equipment and also help building additional classrooms. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed a new auto mechanics lab, a carpentry and sewing lab in the Al Kut vocational and technical schools, and we built two buildings and refurbished an older one, installed water and pump stations -- all very important in building capacity.

And last week, we were very happy and proud to say that we were part of the process and have funded an Internet cafe in an Al Kut girls' secondary school. The cafe provides 10 computers with Internet service for 1,000 Iraqi girls, and Monday we received the funding to build four more labs and classrooms at the University of Wasit Engineering, which has about 3,100 students.

These new buildings will house a computer lab, an asphalt lab, a soil lab, and a survey lab. The college was established in 2006 and will graduate the first class of engineers in 2010.

We're working on projects to address the housing shortages in this province. Our main focus has been putting processes in places and providing the government the ability to sustain itself. This takes time and, as we have learned, patience.

While security will always be an issue -- and I'll never take my focus off that -- we're also trying to build on other developmental processes in building a functional, effective government. Again, our experts from the State Department are working with the mayor and city councils to develop and plan their budgets. They don't always need the money, as we've found out. Sometimes they've just come and asked for the training or the processes and the plannings.

And so as we're aiding more and more capability, I am starting to see a turn here in Wasit province, both in security and in their capability to provide more. Again, I now would like to take any questions or clarity that you may have.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much --

COL. BAKER: Offer clarity.

MR. HOLT: All right. And we've got some folks on line. I'd like to remind you that when I call you, please enter -- state your full name and your publication. So, Farook, why don't you get us started?

Q Hi, Sir. Farook Ahmed from the Institute for the Study of War.

You spoke briefly about the security situation. I'm wondering if you could describe the current enemy situation in Wasit province as far as, say, special groups or Shi'a extremists in Al Kut as well as maybe Sunni extremists further up the Tigris River Valley.

COL. BAKER: Yeah, in every place in Iraq, a little -- every -- certainly every province or region's a little bit different. Where I'm at, it's 98 percent Shi'a. The very northwest part of Wasit, which is not in my area of operation, there is a Sunni-Shi'a mix, which is much closer to Baghdad, more of a blend up there. But that's not my AO.

In my area, as I said, it's almost all Shi'a. There are Shi'a extremists. We've recently had some resurgence of some of the violence. We were attacked about 10 days ago with rockets on our FOB. The police were attacked. The -- they have -- all have said, if you've read the paper, the Sadrists have said that we still have a ceasefire. These are not our guys. These guys are criminals. They have been criminals. And working with the police force and with the army, they're combining their operations and going after these criminals.

It's nothing you can take your eye off, but it's very different here than it is in other parts of Baghdad, and it's hard to draw conclusions and take them in one place.

Q Thank you, sir.

(Cross talk.)

MR. HOLT: Okay, Megan?

Q All right. This is an embedded PRT, is that correct? The 30 members?

COL. BAKER: Well -- (chuckles) -- as I say, in Iraq nothing that works in one place or is it organized. The same thing with the Army and the coalition.

Down here, most brigade combat teams -- and I'm a brigade commander, but I don't have a maneuver brigade. I have 60 of my own soldiers, and then I have other enablers. So I don't have a 34-man brigade. An EPRT, an embedded one, works mostly at the city level, and a normal brigade commander normally looks at the city level as well.

Because of the unique situation I am in here, I work at the provincial level. I engage with the governor and so does this PRT. So it's a full-fledged PRT. It started out as embedded. It really is -- it really doesn't matter. We are so closely connected and we are synched -- embedded is just talking about where their focus is. And this PRT is focused complete -- all the vertical aspects, from the governor level down to the city level. And then -- and occasionally is involved, making connections at the national level.

Q Can I have one more quick one? Can you describe what the essential services are like in Wasit?

COL. BAKER: On the base? Q No, no. I'm sorry, within -- I know it's going to change -- you know, from different community and different neighborhoods and mullahs, but I'm wondering just overall, what's the electricity like? Does the trash get picked up? You know -- is there clean water?

COL. BAKER: Well -- and again, I -- really in a little bit of a -- put everything in perspective. I've had a fair amount of fellow soldiers here who've traveled through Iraq visiting units who are doing missions. And it's interesting, their comment is they consider this area cleaner than a lot of others. A lot of trash is picked up.

They also see much more economic activity here than they have in others. It's all very relative. Electricity is not -- there are still outages on a recurring basis. There are a lot of personal generators they use. And peaks and valleys as far as electricity. At one time, they were averaging 22 hours -- that was a high -- and sometimes as low as 10 hours a day.

I will say it'll be a long, long time before we get all the water that they need. This is not something new or since the invasion. There is a constant need of new -- a source for clean water. There's plenty of water, but it needs to be treated. And electricity is -- will always be something that'll need to be improved upon.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Jarred.

COL. BAKER: And I hope that helps you.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you.

Q Yes, sir. This is Lieutenant Fishman with the Air Force Pundit.

My question is based on, like, the location of Wasit, up against Iran, could you talk a little to that, strategically, about are we able to build enough border force to stop the penetration of the special groups or the IRGC or the other bad actors in your area? And then secondly, what's the attitude of the province toward a unified Iraq aligned closely with us?

COL. BAKER: Aligned closely with who? With us?

Q Yeah.

COL. BAKER: Or with -- yeah.

Okay, I'll take the border issue first. Any border is always a challenge, and even more so when it's geographically unrestrictive. With that being said, there are border forts and there is a defense border enforcement, much like our border patrol, that the Iraqis have. Again, we are committed to helping them, but we have a border transition team made up of American military and former border U.S. agents who understand the training and the requirements that go along with this task.

We have actually built a small base closer to their brigade -- border headquarters, so they are now working and living at the same place. So this border transition, or border training team, is much more effective up there. They're not commuting, as I said. They're there every single day.

We're adding more technology. Technology will never be the complete answer. We still need more training and more Iraqis -- force up there, but they are being much more effective than they were a year ago. We're seeing less -- whether it be illegal -- less illegal crossings, but there are still a lot of opportunity because of the porous borders.

And your second question was a unified Iraq with the United States as far as support. Again, I can only talk of my experience with the citizens and Iraqis here.

They're very, very, very appreciative of what we've done in freeing them from the dictatorship of Saddam's era. Again, this is 98 percent Shi'a, and they are -- the average person is very, very appreciative.

I've had a lot of opportunities to talk to various level of sheikhs and man-on-the-street, and the sentiment is they're very appreciative. They always wish more could be done quicker, and they'll always continue to want -- you know, want more water and better water. But at the end of the day, they are thankful for what we've done for them.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Does anyone -- did somebody join us late?

Q Yes. This is Bart Buechner calling from the West Coast. Sorry -- we got in a little bit late --

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right. Well, Bart, do you have a question for Colonel Baker?

Q Having missed the last couple of minutes of the discussion, I don't think I'll interject one at this point. But thanks.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

Any -- we've got a few minutes left here. Any follow-up questions?

Q I've got a follow-up --

COL. BAKER: Okay.

Q It's Lieutenant Fishman, sir. If you could talk a little bit to where you feel the focus needs to be for the next year as far as what's the major program or project which we really have to put a focus on to increase the success that we've already achieved?

COL. BAKER: Well, again, if you're talking about Wasit province -- that's my area of operation -- I'm more than glad to give you my opinion on that. As far as Iraq, that is well beyond my scope, and it's very different everywhere else.

But within Wasit, I want to build upon our success that I described as far as the medical partnership we've had. And I want to continue that and, as I said, get into the facilities so they have much more capacity.

I want to build upon the education process we have. We're buying books, building classrooms. The media having seminars with the -- we've had one seminar with the media and providing seminars with that.

So I want to continue the momentum we have in building capacities in very many different factors. Agriculture, we're organizing an agricultural union so they will be able to be better organized, more efficient in their operations. Same thing with an engineering union. Rule of law -- very, very difficult, very, very challenging, because it'll be very long-term, changing the thought process. But I want to have momentum established in that. That's all within my area, and I want to make sure we're building not only those capacities, but we're also enriching the capability of the Iraqi security forces.

And so continuing with an NCO academy, continuing with the hands-on performance training with the Iraqi police. We have just started this process, and it's getting momentum. What I'd like to see in a year here is all that momentum maintained and increased.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

And anything else?

COL. BAKER: Yeah, I do have one, and anytime I have an opportunity, I want to personally thank the American public. It is personally quite humbling to see, and it doesn't matter what your political stripes are, and I wouldn't know anyways. But the support from the political -- excuse me, from the American public is just -- it's just humbling and overwhelming at times.

You know, people take their time and money and really -- knowing how valuable time is, I know -- I'm appreciative when we get care packages, and people sending things from, you know, magazines or food or whatever it may be. And I just want to thank the American people for their support.

It can never be said enough times, and I want to make sure they know that we enjoy that.

MR. HOLT: Well, thank you very much, sir. Thank you for joining us today, and we really appreciate it. And, hopefully, we can speak again.

Colonel Peter Baker with the 214th Fires Brigade at Wasit province in Iraq. Thank you so much for joining us, sir.

COL. BAKER: Okay. Thank you and have a good day.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

Q Thanks very much.

END.



